

# Under the Influence

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. —Eph 5:15-16

Last week I had several days in a row where my schedule forced me to be gone all day and basically all night. I did manage, however, to squeeze in a quick dinner with the family one evening. And though I tried to stay positive, I remember looking guiltily down at my plate and thinking, 'my family is only getting the crumbs of my time.' On weeks like this, it is tempting to resent my church family from taking too much time from my home family. But then I recall how many parishioners also get the crumbs of my time, the sick person who lives an hour north, the shut in who lives 2 hours south, the young person who wishes to hang out on a Friday night when I need to be home. It seems there is never enough time for anyone in my life, including me; this for me is perhaps the hardest challenge of parish ministry. But it is not unique to parish ministry, I am sure many of you can relate to this. We live in a culture which pushes us to act as though there is never enough time. We are constantly rushing, possessed to live the most connected and productive life. Yet for me, somehow, all I am doing does not satisfy my being; being a good father and husband, being a good pastor to parishioners, even just relaxing and being myself! Well mercifully, in today's reading from Ephesians, Paul reassures us that being good stewards of our time has never been easy, but that as Christians we can reintegrate a life which threatens to disintegrate into 100 pieces.

But before we come up with a cure, we must name our disease. Paul points at what threatens our good stewardship of time when he says somewhat cryptically that "the days are evil." This is easy to misinterpret in all kinds of dualistic ways; that somehow all the workings of this world are evil, and it's only in the great beyond that our time will be well spent. On our worst days this outlook is tempting, but this of course can't be right. In the first Chapter of the Bible, God made the world and time, blessed it and called it good. Not until the third chapter did humankind and evil enter into play. As with any story, you have to start with chapter 1, not chapter 3. If we do, we see that life as designed by God—all of it—is fundamentally good, and that evil must simply be the misuse of something good. And indeed that is what Paul goes on to say about proper use of our time; "do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is."

All of our trouble with the proper use of our time, comes down to a distorted understanding of what the will of the Lord is for our lives. Paul goes on to say that we all tend to get drunk on the spirits of the age we live in, rather than living in the Holy Spirit. I will say this for myself. Though I could and do secretly blame anyone and everyone when my life gets out of control, the fact is that I am the one who overdoes it. I am the one who gets drunk on the spirits of the world; the self-esteem I get from running a church office well, the adrenaline from doing 12 things at once, the praise that comes with trying to please everyone. About all these ego-driven adrenaline rushes, Paul says "Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk...but be filled with the Spirit."

I suffer, and my home and church families suffer with me, from filling up my days with the spirits of productivity, of success, and control, which always leave me feeling empty, instead of filling up on the Holy Spirit, which always leaves me full. I should know better, because the sometimes impossible demands of my life have left me no choice but to rely on the Holy Spirit. Dear God, I have nothing left, what I've nothing to give this sick family who needs help. And just then, God gives me, and that family His presence. Lord, I am trying to write my 500th sermon. It's Saturday morning, now it's Saturday night, now it's Sunday morning; I have nothing left to say or give! And just then, God gives me, and this church His words, His presence.

I don't know how long it will take me to become wise and make the most of my time. To set proper boundaries for myself and others when tempted to misuse our time on their or my ego-driven pursuits. I don't know how long it will take me to understand (stand under) the will of the Lord, rather than stand under the influence of the spirits of the day. To simply let go and let God fill me with his wisdom and Spirit. What I do know, from experience, is that if I will it, God's Spirit provides all I need, and all my church and home families need. Like the miracle of the 5 loaves that somehow feeds the 5000, my limited supply of time, can be multiplied by God into an abundant and whole life, a life lived joyfully under the influence of the Holy Spirit, now and always; amen.